

After avant-gardes – thoughts on the nature of improvisation and its place in contemporary music

Jerry Wigen

Department of Music, Goldsmiths University of London, United Kingdom
jerrywigen@mac.com

Proceedings of the International Conference *Beyond the Centres: Musical Avant-Gardes Since 1950*
Thessaloniki, Greece, 1-3 July 2010, <http://btc.web.auth.gr/>

Abstract: This paper will consider the position of freely improvised music within the context of the common understanding of the term 'avant-garde'. Against a background of increasing awareness of the form's value and importance and a burgeoning diversity of practice, I will attempt to gather some thoughts about my own perspective and experience, both of which continue to broaden as a result of practical involvement and observation of the texts and commentaries of others. The need to respond to the moment of performance is felt to be intrinsic to the form by many musicians but this will more often than not involve the use of techniques that have been developed as part of a personal and individual sound vocabulary. I will therefore attempt to address the paradox of the improviser's theoretical potential for continuous renewal and innovation set against their frequent use of developed material and techniques, the former seemingly positioning the music as an ideal 'cutting edge' form, the latter suggesting a potential for stasis and conservatism. I will also consider the implications of the preference of many performers to eschew any kind of predetermined arrangement as to form and structure and the bearing this has on the music's acceptance or non-acceptance as valid artistic activity. I shall explore the perception of improvised music as a means to develop interactive skills and the view expressed by the late Derek Bailey that the priority of improvised music is not necessarily novelty or innovation per se, but the need to discover new areas of enquiry by embracing and engaging with a diversity of different approaches; more of an activity that enables personal growth in a collective context, but not necessarily with any underlying progressive agenda.

Speaking of free improvisation in his book *Improvisation – its Nature and Practice in Music*, Derek Bailey writes:

Two regular confusions which blur its identification are to associate it with experimental music or with avant-garde music.... [T]hey are fundamentally quite different to each other. Improvisers might conduct occasional experiments but very few, I think, consider their work to be experimental. Similarly, the attitudes and precepts associated with the avant-garde have very little in common with those held by most improvisors. There are innovations made, as one would expect, through improvisation, but the desire to stay ahead of the field is not common among improvisors. And as regards method, the improvisor employs the oldest in music-making. (Bailey: 83)

Notwithstanding Bailey's last assertion, it is generally recognized that free improvisation is a relatively new kid on the block, a position that, despite its essential derivation from jazz and contemporary classical models, leaves it essentially outside of any continuum of historical progression that might prompt the use of the term 'avant-garde' to describe it. It is simply too new and different an approach to music making for it to be pointing towards anything other than its own future, or indeed for it to be *avant* anything other than its own quite short past. Fitting uneasily into the broader camp of contemporary art music and also that of its near relative jazz, it is something that nevertheless has derived inspiration from both whilst remaining always a product of the diverse individuals that produce it. Because of this dependence on the individual musicians to generate the material of which it consists in the immediacy of the performance setting, any given performance is a momentary expression of individual and collective mood and history; an event in itself with no past or future, and which the term 'avant-garde' would only serve to describe inadequately and, in my view, misleadingly. And as a practice, or 'method' as Bailey describes it, it seems to me to point more to the joint concerns of social inclusion and artistic expediency than to a desire to

instigate any kind of defined vanguard or movement. Certainly, the progressive trajectory that has prompted the term's application in the past to artistic movements such as *De Stijl*, and individuals such as the Darmstadt composers of the early 1950s, would seem to have little relevance to a form whose realization is largely in denial of any concept of progress as a driving force. In fact, it seems that, in its origins and subsequent 45 year existence, free improvisation has come to symbolize the collapse of historical artistic centres and directionality rather well, to the point where, in Chris Cutler's words, '*one artist's 'avant' might be another's 'arrière'*' (Cutler: 3) depending on which way you're facing.

Bailey's use of the term 'experimental' is interesting, because my personal experience has been that the urge to experiment has been integral to much of the improvised music in which I have taken part. I would imagine that Bailey, too, would have accepted that a desire for development and exploration was a key motivator in his own playing even if this did not involve the organized kind of experimentation usually associated with composers such as Cage or Cardew. And while the terms 'avant-garde' and 'experimental' are not exactly interchangeable, neither have they in the past been mutually exclusive. Much innovation has resulted from experimentation which undoubtedly pointed the way forward for musicians, improvisers included, in the wake of Cage and others. However, insofar as the term 'avant-garde' was applied to jazz of the 1950s and 1960s, and to certain western art music of the same period, I'm inclined to side with Cutler's assertion that the work of the historical avant-gardes is pretty much finished in having '*kick-started a new art practice and [liberating], once and for all, media, form and imagination – making anything and everything the proper matter of artistic work*' (Cutler: 13). Any contemporary artist describing themselves as 'avant-garde' might tend, I think, to raise quizzical eyebrows, and the term's currency in contemporary artistic circles has, I believe, become strained almost to the point of irrelevance. This is especially true of its application to improvisation which is dependent on the various methods, technical resources and histories of its participants for its continuing vitality rather than on circumscribed methodologies, movements or prescriptive systems that might be considered ahead of their time.

Improvisation is, above all, an approach to music-making which neither opposes history nor proposes a future. Ironically, though, it serves to nurture individual progress and a continuing desire for contemporaneity, by encouraging the continual questioning, renewal and appraisal of musical material. It could quite justifiably therefore be described as a form on the cutting edge of creative sonic activity which nevertheless stops short at proposing any codified practice or methodology that would qualify it as a movement. New sounds and techniques are inevitably generated which come to be used as referents by other practitioners; a kind of extension of the pool of expressive tools available for all to use. However, an experimental approach is not mandatory and an individual may well be content with using limited and thoroughly familiar materials. Indeed, sometimes a conscious jettisoning of standard instrumental technique occurs involving a retreat to primal elements as the basis for sonic investigation; hardly a forward looking approach associated with 'avant-garde' activity one would have thought, though such questioning of essential materials can hold much potential for discovery, and characteristic of most improvisers is a predisposition for continual forging and foraging that inevitably extends the 'brotherhood of language' once described by Steve Lacy. Such openness and ambiguity towards material was of course also espoused by Cage who, notably, happened to consider himself an experimentalist rather than an avant-gardist.

This is not to say that improvisers are not, as a rule, interested in new developments and technical resources which might serve as useful extensions of their own sound vocabulary. As Derek Bailey wrote about developing material:

The material is never fixed and its historical and systematic associations can be ignored. The improviser can also look for material which will be appropriate for, and which will facilitate, improvisation. (Bailey: 106)

In other words, the improviser's material can be drawn from anywhere and any time and, in a sense, I see improvisers as personifications of open and mobile compositions that are always poised to merge and flower in a variety of new works. They are usually interested first and foremost in playing, in dealing with the stimulus and problems posed by given playing situations. This is not, as is sometimes suggested, an ecstasising of the moment, so much as a need to focus past and present resources towards the creation of work with all its attendant demands, problems and fascinations. Improvisers are, as a rule, more concerned with playing as an end in itself, their general concern being to deal with sound objects (or instruments) and the personal and interpersonal materials to hand with honesty and integrity, a procedure which invariably and inevitably involves an aspect of experimentation. This commitment embraces and encourages individual experimentation without fetishising it to the point of sterility, but rather integrating it as a legitimate means of renewal often vital to the work. And though the form of improvisation can be seen and heard to change with the absorption of new technology, it would seem odd to equate this with progress in a teleological sense. Rather, the use of technology in improvisation seems to result from a characteristically selective form of gathering whereby all materials can be found to be potentially useful. Ostensibly crass technological novelties will always be found a home, whether through ironic usage or radical re-contextualisation, and any obvious progressive applications are often subverted by a concern with a particular technology's capacity for disruption rather than with its more widely accepted and commercially driven novelty value. For the improviser, technology may be a means to an end rather than an opportunity to pursue novelty for its own sake or, as with historical avant-gardes, a pretext to absorb and reflect that technology's image.

Perhaps because of its relative newness it is perhaps inevitable that the originators of the form are still looked upon with a degree of reverence in regard to procedures and approach, despite their often stated reluctance to serve as models or to take on the role of theorists. A certain language has arguably developed that has served as a basis for a second and third generation of improvisers to work from, and there is no doubt that free improvisation has had its own trajectory of change and evolution. Gary Peters, in his excellent and thought-provoking book 'The Philosophy of Improvisation' argues that this evolution has been largely guided by its originators' emphasis on dialogue as the form's indispensable component. Speaking of the listening of performers he writes:

As with so much else, what might be called the ontological significance of listening has suffered within the realms of improvisation – where it has regal status – by being cuffed to a rampant dialogism that cannot hear beyond the everyday mechanics and machinations of social interaction played out within the aesthetic domain. (Peters: 123)

Peters seems to suggest, following a line from Adorno's immanent critique of jazz improvisation through to the incorporation of the thoughts of Heidegger and Nietzsche, that free improvisation is close to realizing an ideal of freedom, which is only hindered by a continuing preoccupation with the inter-subjective and dialogical. He supports his argument with the thoughts of Heidegger and Nietzsche and describes a need to heed the underlying 'silence' that 'calls' to be filled in the emerging work and which can only be perceived adequately, not through a process of inter-subjective dialogue, which he sees as a distraction, but by a kind of listening through and above the work, embracing awareness of history, memory and personalities that converge to spur the creative input of individuals. This underlying 'call' of the silence, he suggests, demands an appropriate response which might involve the recycling of past material or the invention of new strategies. Past models that prioritise continual variation and innovation are therefore challenged to include all and any

material deemed appropriate by participants. This might, he argues, enable continual renewal by looking back to older material to re-inform creative trajectories and pave the way for a truly expansive and emancipating art that could serve as an example to other performative arts. Like Peters, I am not convinced that dialogue is or should be the fundamental motor of improvised music, which I have come to see as more of an additive or constructive process whereby individuals place themselves and their music alongside each other, with the intention that the resulting work will communicate something of the group's collective spirit. This endeavour necessitates what Peters describes as a 'forgetful' listening, an idea of Nietzsche's, to Heidegger's 'call' rather than continuous reaction to inter-subjective stimuli, the musical equivalent, it would seem, of the simultaneous uttering of a shared position or opinion. Increasingly, I have observed that improvisers consider dialogue to be only one aspect of the form's many possibilities, and that more prevalent is a view that improvising is more akin to a collective construction process. In this approach, continual innovation isn't as important as the ability to utilize whatever material comes to mind in renewed and renewable circumstances, and to develop a virtuosity of listening and judgment that calls more for a concern with broad developments than the continual, momentary reactions of dialogue-driven work. Having said this, individual contributions to an improvised work will and should be influenced by the activity of other participants, although the impact or convergence with one another of the independent courses set in motion at the outset will be largely determined by familiarity and experience, and the most satisfying pieces for me are where a confluence of thought, movement and focus occurs that is cognisant of the work in progress and all of its diverse and contrasting elements. Again, Bailey writes:

..there is a forward-looking imagination which, while mainly concerned with the moment, will prepare for later possibilities. Rather in the way that memory works, perhaps, a piece can be criss-crossed with connections and correspondences which govern the selection and re-selection of events as well as guiding the over-all pacing of the piece.
(Bailey: 111)

It is true that a novice might find a dialogical approach useful in establishing common ground, momentum and fluency, but this might become less necessary as reactive, interpersonal and predictive skills develop with experience. For myself, I have found that it is more important to have a focused and developed awareness of what my playing partners have done and are doing and to play with or against this. This isn't to say that I'm striving for friction or contradiction (though they have their place) but rather for a creative contrast in keeping the music mobile and challenging. Certainly I'm listening intently to everything but concern with my personal contribution is paramount in the overall process. I like to think I listen to Heidegger's 'call' with Nietzsche's 'active forgetfulness' in having no tricks up the sleeve or preconceived strategies. The expectation of limitless innovation on the part of performers is, of course, not only unreasonable but could be argued to be counter-productive, and is perhaps as damaging as the pillorying of recurrent material and techniques which usually accompanies it. Material of whatever kind should always be flexible in an improvising situation and the quality and ingenuity of the individual musician will be evident in its timely use and deployment. Again, a virtuosity of listening and judgment is called for in the use and invention of material which, in ever-changing contexts, is never the same twice. In other words, it's not what you do but when and the way that you do it.

As for the place of improvisation in the broader field of contemporary music, I think this is slowly gaining in presence thanks to its increased acceptance as a valid form in its own right and the enlisting on to academic faculties of improvisers such as George Lewis and Barry Guy. Contemporary composers such as Roger Redgate have also helped by acknowledging the importance of the form as an essential practice that is valuable to all musicians. Its transient nature and resistance to documentation have, of course, been disadvantages in being accepted by western academic establishments that have traditionally denied credibility to any

form lacking a tangible methodology. That said, its values and procedures might well come to be regarded as a foundation for future creative strategies in all the arts as a more detailed enquiry of the processes at play is attempted. Its isolation from the academy has had certain advantages in ensuring that the music remains the preserve of the active musicians creating it, the diversity of whom likewise ensures that no single trajectory or methodology could ever be seriously envisaged. However, I think that, equally, it is incumbent on improvisers to discover means of imparting knowledge and experience to younger musicians keen to develop skills as improvisers and for discussion to be had about all aspects of the form.

Art now has the capacity to be permanently fluid and mobile to the extent that the artist can indulge in a continual process of re-casting rather than becoming fixated with the idea of the individual work and its dubious value for posterity and modern artists can work in various locations and contexts as situations demand, carrying their work and ideas with them in ways hitherto impossible. Peters is correct in his assertion that a form whose life blood is praxis is never likely to have a comprehensive theory attached to it. However, in my view there is still much useful discussion to be had that will benefit performers, musicologists and administrators alike; notably about how or whether free improvisation can be taught, and, if it can, the possibility of its introduction to school and academic curricula. Questions of personal progress, improvement and approach to improvisation are seldom addressed but essential to a broader understanding of its mechanisms and conceptual basis. Because if free improvisation can be described as ahead of the game in any respect it must surely be in the context of social progress, where it could be seen as conducive to musical participation by all regardless of training or background. It represents a fundamental challenge to market-oriented cultural mechanisms that thrive on consumption as opposed to practice and participation. And if it points the way towards anything it is surely to new attitudes of inclusion and participation in music making; a utopian ideal perhaps, but one for which I live in quiet hope.

References

- Bailey, Derek: *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (2nd ed., London: The British Library National Sound Archive, 1992 / New York: Da Capo, 1993; 1st ed., 1980)
- Cutler, Chris: 'Thoughts on Music and the Avant-Garde – consideration of a term and its public use' (2005) in Hanns-Werner Heister /Peter Wicke (eds.) *Avant-garde music - the dialectic of vanguard and rearguard - a collection of thoughts for Günter Mayer's 75th Birthday* (Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag, 2006)
- Lewis, George E: *A Power Stronger than Itself: the AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008)
- Peters, Gary: *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009)
- Prevost, Edwin: *No Sound is Innocent: AMM and the practice of self-invention: meta-musical narratives: essays* (Matching Tye, Essex: Copula, 1995)
- Small, Christopher: *Music, Society, Education* (3rd ed., Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1996; 1st ed., 1977)